

## WHO ARE THE *BAYINI* ?

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### ABSTRACT

In the literature, the first non-Aboriginal visitors to the Arnhem Land coast (pre - Macassan) are referred to as *Bayini*. The stories of the *Bayini* have meaning only when seen through the mythology of the ancestral being *Birrinydji*, who, in a "cargo" type perspective, is the foundation of the wealth of non-Aborigines. At the "beginning of time", Aborigines possessed this wealth, but through misadventure this was lost, and now "whites" control the production and distribution of material goods. The mythology of *Birrinydji* is constituted in the ever-changing nature of relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines. In an examination of a Flag treaty proposal by members of the Warramiri clan of Elcho Island, it is apparent that accounts of the past, seen through this body of law, are constantly changing. This fact, combined with the almost innumerable possible variations in accounts emphasising either "inside" or "outside" myth or history or combinations thereof, suggests that while a complex past is being evoked in *Bayini* narratives, great caution is needed when attempting to make definitive statements about it.

KEYWORDS: Aboriginal art, Aboriginal history, Aboriginal myth, Australian flag, *Bayini*, *Birrinydji*, cargo cult, identity, Macassan, northern Australia, reconciliation, representation, the "Other", treaty.

### INTRODUCTION

Mystery surrounds the identity of the *Bayini*, a group of people that *Yolngu* (Aborigines from north-east Arnhem Land) regard as the forerunners of Macassans. By "Macassan", I am referring to those peoples who were engaged in the trepang industry on the northern Australian coast from at least 1700, and whose historical existence is not in question. Aborigines clearly differentiate the *Bayini* from the Macassans, and herein lies the problem from an anthropological viewpoint. Aboriginal accounts locate the "historical" *Bayini* in Arnhem Land, but the stories are also connected with Macassar or Ujung Pandang, and the trepang industry (Berndt and Berndt 1954: 37; Mountford 1956-64: 334). As the historian Macknight (1972: 313) indicates, much of the terminology associated with them is also Macassan.

Despite this, speculation on the identity of the *Bayini* is rife. Some writers say they were Macassan, Sama-Bajau or sea nomads (Berndt 1965:5), while others suggest they were

Gudjeratis from India (Halls 1965: 4), Chinese (Levathes 1994; Worsley 1955: 2), Dutch, or even Portuguese (Mountford 1956-64: 334). In one extreme case, they were considered to be voyagers from the moon and were brought to the attention of the science fiction writer Von Daniken (E. Saffi pers. comm. 1993). It is fair to say that this question represents one of the longer standing puzzles of northern Australian history and anthropology (Capell 1965: 68).

In seeking to contribute to an answer to this puzzle, I compare and contrast ten Aboriginal art works pertaining to external influences and relate these to ever-changing nature of accounts of "totem" hunters, *Bayini* and Macassans in the literature.

Macknight (1972: 317; 1986: 72) called for an analysis of the way the memory of the trepang industry has been transformed and put to use in contemporary Aboriginal politics. I suggest that the *Bayini* are in the image of how some Aboriginal groups are believed to have once existed at the "beginning of time" (in the *Wangarr* or "Dreaming"). In an almost archetypal "cargo

cult" scenario (e.g. Burrige 1971), Aborigines once possessed the wealth and technologies of non-Aborigines. Following contact with Macassans, poor "black" Aborigines found themselves to be dominated by rich "whites".

I contend that the actions of Macassans and possibly other voyagers to the Australian coast have become the basis of a sacred law relevant in contemporary Aboriginal dealings with non-Aborigines. From this perspective, I suggest that the search for a single group by the name *Bayini*, is misplaced. More important is it to ask, why do some people use this category, while others do not? The mythology and associated historical descriptions of the *Bayini* are an example of Aboriginal imagination at work in a continuing construction of identity in the context of an ever-changing relationship with the "other"<sup>1</sup>. The term *Bayini* is an "outside" or public label<sup>2</sup>, relevant in particular contexts in discussions about such relationships.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The most authoritative accounts of the Macassan era are Macknight's (1976) *The voyage to Marege*, and the work of R.M. and C.H. Berndt (1954) in *Arnhem Land, its history and its people*. While Macknight looked specifically at the history and organisation of the trepang industry, the Berndts (1954: 64) attempted to show that there were a number of discrete phases of external contacts. According to informants in the 1940s, Aborigines were subjected to four separate waves of visitation prior to the arrival of Japanese pearlcrs and Europeans this century.

Berndt and Berndt (1954: 64) suggest that for countless centuries, Aborigines had been aware of a people known as *Wurramala*. Song cycles concerning their activities had their origins in the tidal flotsam from the islands to the north, and also by irregular visits by peoples from there (Berndt 1948: 103). Accounts are ambiguous. In some interpretations, these "totem" hunters are associated with the "land of the dead" and assist in the passage of the soul of deceased Aborigines to this place. In others, the songs are said to be about reflections on travel aboard Macassan

praus (Berndt 1948). Informants were divided on whether eastern Indonesia and/or Torres Strait was involved (Berndt 1978/79: 65-67; McIntosh 1995).

Stories of the exploits of "totem" hunters are associated with what Morphy (1990) referred to as myths of creation. Representations in art are few and more often than not, the presence of the "other" is inferred in paintings depicting the

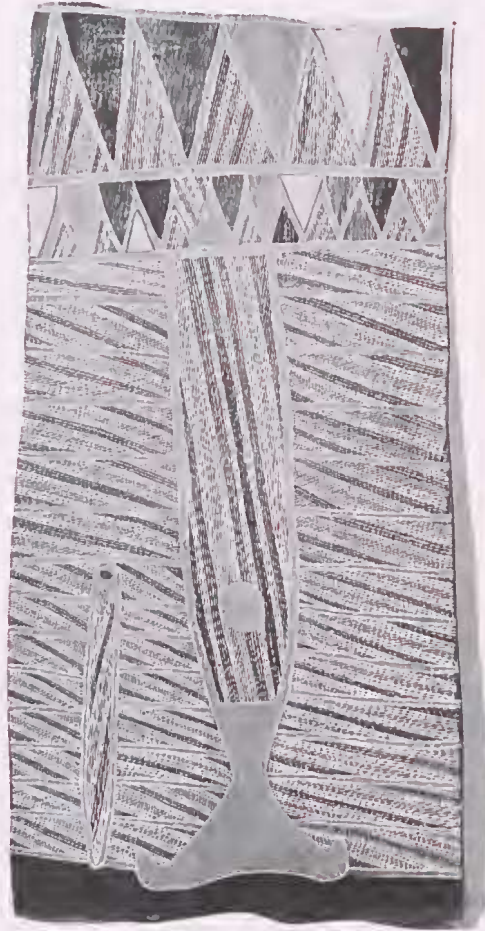


Fig. 1. The body of the whale captured by the "totem" hunter *Wurramala*, north of Elcho Island. The whale's backbone is depicted on the left hand side. By Bapayili of the Wolgara clan. Whether the stories associated with these "totem" hunters reflect early Macassan encounters or a separate wave of historical contact, is unknown. Courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Abart366).

<sup>1</sup> The constitution of the "other" by anthropologists and by indigenous peoples is a major issue in contemporary anthropology (Fabian 1983). This paper discusses the encounter of each with the other, i.e. Aboriginal representations of "whites" (Macassans and Europeans) in myth and oral history and the presentation of these representations by non-Aboriginal academics, and the way they inter-relate.

<sup>2</sup> See Rudder (1993:23) for an overview of the use of "inside" and "outside" terminology.



journey of the spirit of the *Yolngu* deceased (Mountford 1956-64: 314) or through association with sacred totemic emblems, as in Figure 1.

The next wave of visitors was known as the *Bayini*. The term was described by the Berndts (1954: 34),

(It) is used to classify the first (settlers on) the northern coast of Arnhem Land...All along the coast...special sites are said to have been associated with them. There are certain rocks that symbolise a wrecked *Bayini* boat, or a lost anchor, and various places are named after incidents that occurred during their stay. Personal names of many Aborigines today signify their *Bayini* derivation...We cannot be certain who these *Bayini* people were...The Aborigines are quite decided that (they) were not like the Macassans who came after them because they are remembered particularly for the golden colour of their skin.

Unlike “white” Macassans, the *Bayini* are said to have built stone houses in north-east Arnhem Land, while the women made pottery and cultivated the ground, growing rice in Gumatj and Warramiri territory. Berndt and Berndt (1949: 220) and Worsley (1955) give contrasting views on the involvement of local Aboriginal people in these industries.

Little information has been published on this group and what there is has been gleaned from

Aboriginal song cycles (e.g. Berndt and Berndt 1947a: 135). Of the researchers with first hand experience in north-east Arnhem Land, a majority either doubted the historical existence of pre-Macassans or used a number of terms to describe their mythological character, e.g. *Wangarr* or “Spirit” Macassans (Warner 1969; Williams 1986).

While Berndt (1965: 5) acknowledged the difficulties of locating the *Bayini* in time and space because of the way in which the Aboriginal past is enshrined in contemporary song and ritual, he did not question informants' statements that a separate wave of contact was involved. He thought that the *Bayini* might have been sea nomads from the islands off southern Sulawesi, Selayar or Bouton. The word *Bayini* is in common use in those parts (Berndt 1965: 5), meaning a girl or woman. The Berndts remained undecided, however, as to whether settlement was planned or enforced, but suggest that contact could have been before the sixteenth century, although they add that more archaeological or other evidence is needed (Berndt and Berndt 1947a: 133).

The Berndts suggest Aborigines did not desire to imitate the *Bayini*, preferring their own way of life. While the two groups co-existed, they did not seem to have been willing to learn from each other. The *Bayini*, for instance, kept the secret of weaving to themselves (Berndt and Berndt 1954: 38).

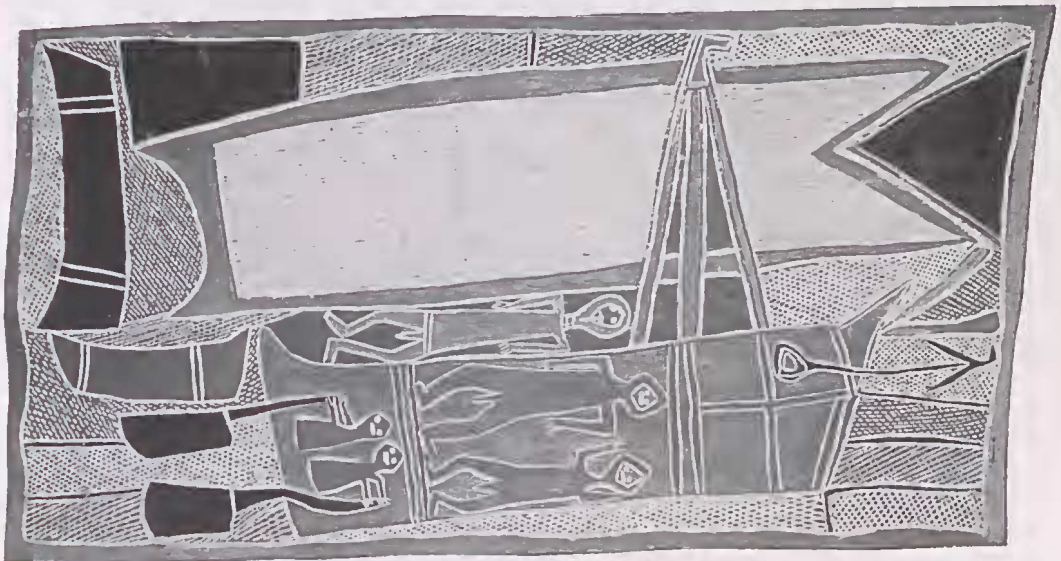


Fig. 2. A Macassan *prau* under sail. Artist unknown, c.1970. This “outside” or public painting depicts the annual historical voyages of Macassans to and from Arnhem Land. The black triangle represents the north wind *Lungurra*, which brought the *praus* on to the coast, and identifies the painting as belonging to the *yirritja* moiety or half of *Yolngu* society. Four Macassans (at the oars and below deck) and an Aboriginal (on top) are on board. Photo courtesy of P. Lane.

Representations of the *Bayini* in art are rare and there is a degree of confusion between them, Macassans and Aborigines. In one case, a *Bayini* man identified by the Berndts (1954: 36) as Wonatjay is described by Mountford as an Aborigine that had been to Macassar (1956-64: 299). In another example, the image of *Bayini* women at work (on their weaving looms in a painting by Liwukang of the Warramiri clan in Cawte 1993: 83) is identical in many respects to a Gumatj painting by Mungurrawuy made in the 1950s, though he describes the female figures as Macassan.

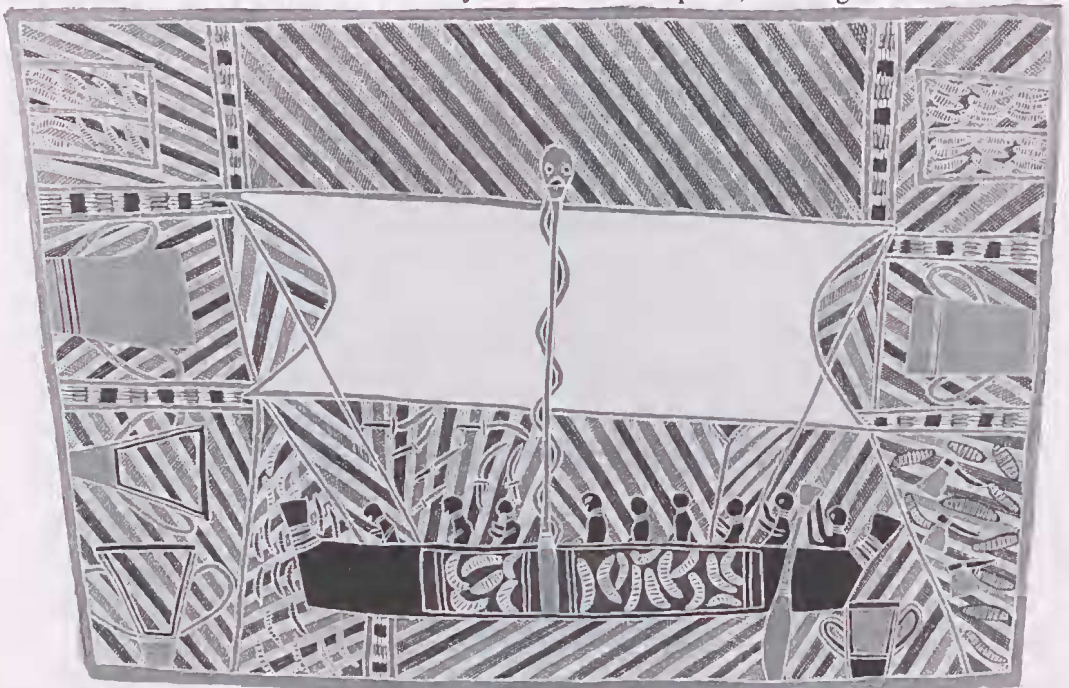
After the *Bayini*, there were evidently two phases of Macassan contact. The Berndts (1954: 40) speculate that the first lasted from 1700 until the 1820s and the second until 1907. Macknight (1972: 289) however found little evidence to justify this view. In giving an overview of the Macassan trepang industry, Macknight (1976: 1) says:

It began in about AD. 1700 and continued on until the early years of this century. For most of the nineteenth century, and probably the hundred years before that as well, at least a thousand men made the voyage each year...their product was exported to an international market. Their object

was purely commercial, for they themselves had no use whatsoever for trepang.

The established picture presented in the literature is that the Macassans and Aborigines co-existed, on the whole, in peace and harmony, although it is difficult to substantiate such generalisations (Macknight 1972: 289; Swain 1993; Worsley 1955: 9). According to Macknight (1972: 303) there was a degree of mutual trust between the groups, and certain Macassan boat captains had a basic knowledge of Aboriginal culture, languages and place names. It appears that the visitors had no interest in changing Aboriginal lifestyles, or of exploring inland rivers for the purposes of colonisation (Warner 1969: 449).

Aborigines assisted in the industry by diving for trepang, smoking and curing the sea slug, fishing, building smoke houses for curing, cutting firewood and digging wells (Worsley 1955: 3). Not only were they wage labourers, they also stockpiled turtle shell, pearls and trepang and exchanged these for trade goods such as axes, knives and tobacco (Macknight 1972: 308; Worsley 1955: 3). As with the *Bayini* and “totem” hunters, images of specific Macassans are rare. They appear as silhouette figures aboard Macassan praus, as in Figures 2 and 3.

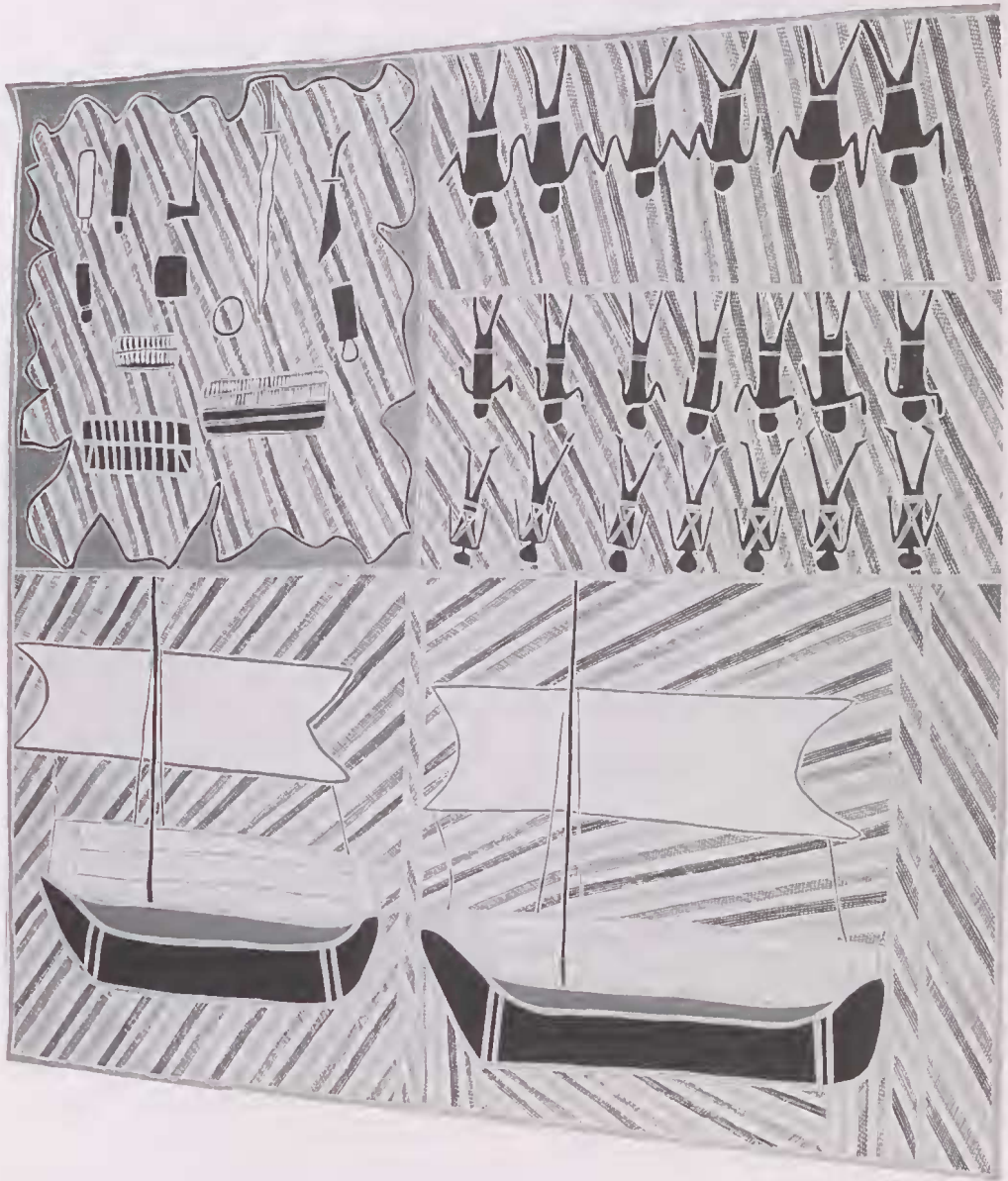


**Fig. 3.** Macassan sailing canoe. Artist - Liwukang of the Warramiri clan. 1993. Trepang in the sailing canoe and on the sides of the painting links it with the Macassan era, and not the *Bayini*, according to the artist. It is an “outside” or public painting referring to historical encounters, and yet the octopus, a sacred totem of the artist’s clan, entwining the mast, hints at the “inside” significance of these same encounters in Aboriginal law. Courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Abart1175).



Little evidence is available from the early period of Macassan contact, but the prodigious wealth of the visitors and their desire to share this with Aborigines (Worsley 1955: 3) and accounts of rituals held jointly by the visitors and Aborigines (e.g. Fig. 4) suggest mutual co-operation between the parties at some point in the past. Berndt and Berndt (1954: 46) noted:

...(T)he most colourful of all...(Macassan) ceremonies, so Aborigines say, was the gala Bau'wulji, translated graphically by Mission natives as "Christmas Day". It was held during the "cold" season at Manangu (Mununu or Dholtji) in country called by the Macassans Wusing-djaladjari, (Ujung Djalatjirri - Cape Wilberforce) "the Last Point"- their last main



**Fig. 4.** Ritual of celebration. This "outside" painting by Mattjuwi of the Gumatj clan in 1993 depicts a scene from the early Macassan era. Two Macassan *praus* are shown, and on the top left are items of trade. On the top right, Macassan men (with crosses on their chests) and Aborigines, are seen performing a ceremony together. Courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Abart 1177).

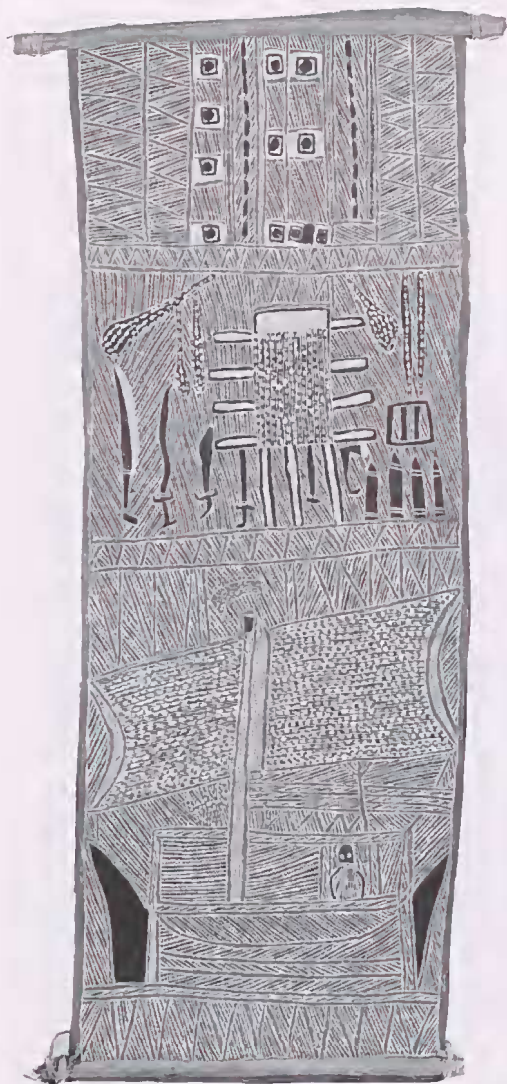


Fig. 5. The Abduction. As with Figure 4, this 1993 painting shows articles of trade and also a trepang cooking area. On board the boat is a lone person, Lul'wariwuy of the Ngaymil clan, an Aboriginal woman abducted by the Macassan Captain Maliwa from Arnhem Bay in the 1890s. She never returned. She was a classificatory mother of the Gumatj artist, Mattjuwi (Cooke 1986:33-34; *Sydney Morning Herald*, "Good Weekend", 2 October, 1993: 11-16). Courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Abar1178).

meeting place on the coast, prior to the homeward trip with the south-east winds. This was during the first phase of contact, before they expanded their operations further into the west of Arnhem Land. Here in the sheltered waters behind Cape Wilberforce all the praus assembled, their cargoes were checked, and they held a great ceremony of farewell...they played musical instruments, let off fireworks, and both the

Indonesians and their Aboriginal employees joined in dancing and singing.

Curiously, the area where this ritual is said to have occurred is in the very same place that Matthew Flinders met the Macassan Pobasso in 1803. Pobasso reported little contact with the Aborigines, believing them to be treacherous (Flinders 1814). Berndt and Berndt (1954: 46) locate this period of joint celebration in the early stage of Macassan contact, and such a view lends support to informants' statements that there was considerable difference in the nature of contacts between the two phases. Thus while the Macassans appear to have been welcomed initially, relations deteriorated in the last phase of contact. The Berndts (1954: 47) commented:

In the old days...trading partnerships were established between the two groups. These involved reciprocal obligations and created classificatory ties of kinship.

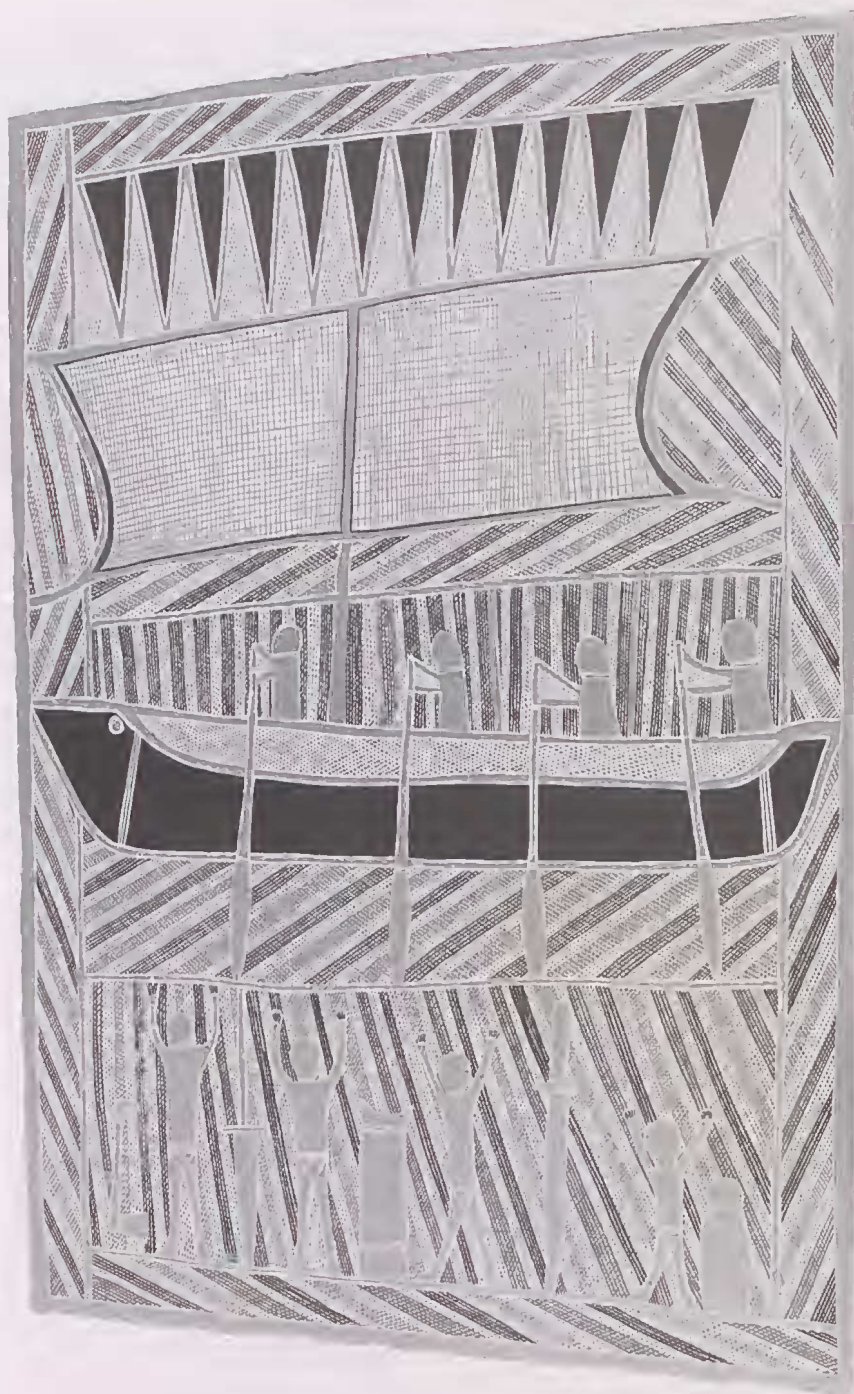
In the final stages of the industry, "...the Aborigines began to feel that they were being exploited" (Berndt and Berndt 1954: 110). Alcohol was introduced as a means of paying Aborigines, leading to violence on both sides. It led to prostitution in the Macassan camps and the death of many Aborigines by gun or sword (Berndt and Berndt 1954: 47). The Berndts add that there were many murders of crew members as well. The atrocities described by Searcy (1909, 1912) are linked to this time, and are reflected in Figures 5 and 6.

By the late nineteenth century there was a growing concern by Australian authorities about the trepang trade. The Macassans were not paying taxes and there were questions about their treatment of Aborigines. In 1907, after continued pressure for Europeans to take control of the industry, the Government prohibited the entry of these peoples and a major chapter in Australian history came to an end (Macknight 1986: 73).

#### BAYINI: PRE-MACASSANS, WANGARR MACASSANS, OR SPIRIT MACASSANS?

Figures 1 to 7 contain images of what Aboriginal people perceive to be actual historical events and/or periods, e.g. the *Bayini* coming to Port Bradshaw; joint ceremonies of celebration with Macassans; trepanging; voyages to Macassar; the abduction of women and so on. In





**Fig. 6. The Firing Squad.** This 1993 painting by the artist Daypurryun of the Liagawumirr clan also relates specifically to an historical incident from his clan territory at Elcho Island. At the bottom one can see three men (Aborigines) and a boy (a Macassan). They face a Macassan firing squad for the murder of a crew of trepangers, but on the strength of evidence from the young man, the Aborigines are spared, and one clan leader is taken to prison in Macassar (Isaacs 1979:84; Read and Read 1991:16-18; *Sydney Morning Herald*, "Good Weekend", 2 October, 1993: 11-16). Courtesy of the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (Abartl 176).



Fig. 7. The *Bayini* at Port Bradshaw. 1950s. Artist unknown. In one of only a few depictions of the *Bayini*, this "inside" or sacred Gumatj/Warramiri painting depicts two *Bayini* men holding swords in either hand, and two *Bayini* women. The figures are bright yellow in colour, which Berndt and Berndt (1947a:133) say is the same as that of a certain species of flying fox. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

this section, I look at the confusion that has resulted from attempting to view Aboriginal accounts of the *Bayini* or the Macassan past as history alone.

The earliest anthropological studies in northeast Arnhem Land which mention outsiders were undertaken by the American Lloyd Warner in the 1920s and Donald Thomson in the 1930s, and neither mentions the *Bayini*. Warner (1969) wrote in detail of the social effects of Malay (Macassan) contact and discussed the impact of what he termed the *Wangarr* Macassans on Aboriginal mythology, and in particular, mortuary ritual. Thomson's (1957) approach was somewhat different. He raised questions of the psychological impact of early Macassans on Aborigines, but apart from a few lines on acculturation and the apparent hero worship of the early traders, he did not pursue the matter. Thomson (1949) looked instead at the impact of a "virile"

culture from Indonesia on local Arnhem Land trade networks and speculated on the ancient nature of the visits. As with Warner, there is a presumption that Macassans were the only group of visitors to have been involved with Aborigines, and that complex mythologies were in place explaining their origin and purpose.

It was in the 1940s that the term *Bayini* first appeared in the literature, but it is evident that in the various accounts they are seen not only as *Wangarr* Macassans, but also as a wave of historical influence prior to Macassans. Berndt and Berndt for instance say that the *Bayini* came at the beginning of the historical period, after the "golden age" of the creator beings. Djang'kawu had already peopled the region but the arrival of the *Bayini* was considered so early that "...they are regarded less as historical figures than as mythological spirits" (Berndt and Berndt 1954: 33).



As *Wangarr* or “spirit” Macassans, the *Bayini* are seen to be of a similar order to other totemic or ancestral figures, i.e. creating sacred sites and transforming the landscape, with Aborigines acquiring their qualities, characteristics and laws. For instance Williams (1986: 2) says:

...when the Macassans first arrived on the coast, the Aborigines then living there were expecting them. This was because during that time in the far distant past when spirit-beings were investing the world with meaning, spirit-Macassans had appeared. They brought with them in spirit form the things that “real” Macassans would later bring and explained their use.

Mountford’s (1956-64: 334) account includes one of the very few myths published on the *Bayini*. He tells of how golden skinned people from Jumaina (Fig. 7) brought their women and children with them to Arnhem Land. At the *Bayini* totemic centre at Port Bradshaw there are two totemic wells in which their ancestors still live today. He writes:

Gurumuluna, the headman of the *Bayini* and his sister camped at a waterhole...(at) Port Bradshaw. After a while, transforming themselves into flying foxes, the brother and sister flew...(to the western shore) where they changed themselves back into human beings and copulated. Both their footprints and the marks of the woman’s buttocks can be seen on the rocks at Dalmumnia. Later, as flying foxes, they flew to Melville Bay, where again, transforming themselves into human beings, they lived as man and wife (Mountford 1956-64: 336).

In the 1940s, Aborigines stressed the differences between *Wangarr* Macassans (i.e. *Bayini*) and Macassan trepanners (Berndt 1965: 5). Apart from differences in terminology for common items of trade and their different skin colour to Macassans, the *Bayini* are said to have brought women with them. No women were present on the Macassan boats (Berndt and Berndt 1954: 36), although one reference suggests that Asian women might have been “given” to Aboriginal men in exchange for access to land (Berndt and Berndt 1947b: 249), but this was questioned by informants I spoke with. Some stories, however, suggest a relationship between *Bayini* and Macassans. Berndt and Berndt (1954: 37-38) for instance record that:

Before the *Bayini* left the Australian mainland, they looked around and saw smoke rising from a fire far away at Macassar. Then the *Bayini* headman spoke, “We have to go there and leave this place. It is better that native people should work for us there”. When they reached Macassar the *Bayini* built a big tank and filled it with hot water. They climbed into it and soaped themselves until they became white in colouring, just like (Macassans and) Europeans. Aborigines say that this is why the *Bayini* songs are mixed with those relating to Macassans.

While R.M. Berndt (pers. comm. 21 August, 1989), saw the historical aspect of the *Bayini* stories as being of primary significance, there are other pieces of information which he recorded which hint more at the material’s deeper significance to the *yirritja* moiety and clan identity. For instance, he notes that apart from the *yirritja* secular ceremonies associated with the *Bayini*, the Warramiri clan have sacred *Bayini* ceremonies called *Gwolwunbulma*, *Lilgarun*, *Mara’raguma* or *Janderalguma*, relating to the “shovel-nose” iron-bladed spear, the knife and axe, and in these, *Bayini* figures are used as a *madayin* or *rangga* (sacred objects). Berndt and Berndt (1949: 221) also note that:

The *Bayini*...sent out their ideas and customs, (mainly ritual and ceremony), called “law”, to different *yirritja* groups of aborigines, from Cape Wilberforce to Caledon Bay.

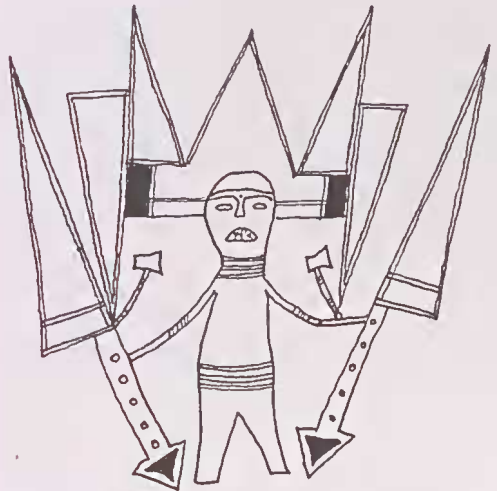


Fig. 8. A line drawing of the “man of iron”, *Birrinjdji*, from Cawte (1993:78).

In the late 1960s historians set about debunking what they deemed to be inventions in Aboriginal accounts of the past. Macknight (1976), in his work *The Voyage to Marege*, refers to the puzzling ceremonies with Macassan associations:

Most remarkable of all are certain stories, associated with particular places in Australia, that I believe to be derived from experiences and observation in South Celebes and possibly elsewhere. The idea of things which properly belong overseas has been transferred to familiar places in order to integrate this knowledge into the spatially oriented framework of Aboriginal thought" (Macknight 1976: 161).

He adds that the stories of the *Bayini* are, "...a most remarkable instance of the need to distinguish between the account of the past current in a society and the actual events of the past," (Macknight 1976: 161), and that:

Whatever one makes of the Baiini stories, there are no details in this material or in any other Aboriginal information about the Macassans that can be assigned with confidence to a period other than the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The time needed to produce the effects of Macassan contact seen in some Aboriginal societies is a matter of opinion. I believe that two centuries is more than enough time (Macknight 1976: 97-98).

The overwhelming view therefore is that the stories of the *Bayini* are largely invention and based on actual Macassan and perhaps other contacts, and also Aboriginal experiences overseas, but what is the *Bayini* law, and of what relevance was it in the past or now? Why did Aborigines insist in the separation of the *Bayini* from Macassans, and why did they focus on the activities of women in accounts of pre-Macassans? In the next section I compare and contrast two myths, one from the 1920s and the other from the 1990s, as a means of examining these issues.

#### COMPARISON OF THE EARLIEST AND MOST RECENT REPRESENTATIONS IN MYTH

The recent appearance in the literature of the "man of iron", *Birrinydji* (Fig. 8), (Cawte 1993: 42; McIntosh 1992: 101; 1994a: 78-79; 1994b: 93) has necessitated a complete re-thinking of

the ways in which the Aboriginal past has been represented by academics. *Birrinydji* is both an ancestor for the Warramiri clan, and the husband of a female ancestral being called *Bayini*, and is the perceived source of the "other's" power. *Birrinydji* brought not only the historical pre-Macassans but also Macassans and Europeans to Arnhem Land. Pre-Macassans, who also go by the name *Bayini*, are linked with the emergence of this "inside" or sacred law.

Take the following for example. Burrumarra (in McIntosh 1992: 101) of the Warramiri clan says:

*Birrinydji* and *Bayini* are for Dholtji (a Warramiri homeland). All things come from *Birrinydji*. Two thousand years ago came to our land. They had a job to do. They wanted to make the land and the people strong. It was at *Birrinydji's* command that they came. The iron in the ground acted like a magnet, drawing them in.

*Birrinydji* was like a blanket over the land. Everything came under him. He was both white and black. He was very rich and had many things. He was an iron-maker. *Bayini* made clothing, planted rice and directed *Yolngu* women in this. *Birrinydji* came from the ground, from the gold beneath.

Visitors to Dholtji had settlements all along Cape Wilberforce. There were thousands of people, men, women and children...When we followed *Birrinydji's* law, we prospered. But then things started to go wrong. We wanted only good but bad came too... We turned our back on the laws of *Birrinydji* and we lost everything. There is great sadness in our memory and this is why we don't like to bring it up. Today we follow the laws of *Birrinydji*. We have only the song and the ceremony but we have lost the ability to make iron. But if we follow this law, maybe these things will come to us again.

Then compare this with a myth recorded by Warner in the 1920s, which is the only other reference to the "fall" in the literature. It is an "outside" myth concerning the activities of the Warramiri totemic Dog *Bol'lili*, and its meeting with Macassans at the very same place referred to above, i.e. Dholtji on Cape Wilberforce (D. Burrumarra pers. comm. 1990). The informant, not identified by Warner (1958: 537) told that:

A very, very long time ago everything was different. People who lived in this place had skin just like Macassar men and Macassar men



had skin like black men. Macassar men worked for black men then, just like we work for Macassar men by and by.

Dog was talking to his master. "We better break this house down and throw him away and live without houses."

The master of the dog talked to him. He said, "What do you want? Do you want something? He imitated the master's speech.

The man said, "No, I asked you."

Dog said, "No, I asked you."

They repeated this several times. That dog did not understand what that black fellow-white man saying. The black man who was a white man said, "You don't understand what I am asking you for." He said that to the dog.

The dog continued acting silly, and said he did not want anything. The white man said, "You're the black man now and I the white. I am the master. I'll give you matches and tobacco and a sailing boat and tomahawks."

The dog said, "I don't want them. You can have them."

That master went back and another headman came. The first headman said, "I have come back."

The other said, "Why have you come back?"

He said, "Because Dog talked badly to me. I offered to give him all of those things and he said he did not want them."

The other Macassan man said, "All right, all we people will keep all these things because Dog talked that way. We'll let them work for us."

The Macassar men came in their boats for trepang. The black people who belonged to Dog went out to work for them. They became more and more black because Dog had acted so silly. A long time ago we people were white, now we are black. The name of this time a long time ago was *Wangarr* time. This happened when the world started.

Given the lack of any historical evidence for any other significant contacts, the implication is that an "inside" view of *Bayini* sees the visitors as an ahistorical population instigating the law of *Birrinydji* at the "beginning of time". The *Bayini* era is both a time in which Aborigines possess the wealth of the "other" and are in the image of that "other", and simultaneously, the "other" (*Wangarr* Macassans) are present on Aboriginal land and their wealth, which Aborigines desire, is denied them. In a "cargo" type perspective of "loss", Macassans and Europeans

enjoy the wealth that Aborigines once possessed. It also explains how one came to be in a subordinate position in relation to the other.

The "fall" is therefore crucial in understanding the distinction between the "historical" *Bayini* (*Wangarr* Macassans) and Macassans. It is really a distinction between the "inside" law of *Birrinydji* and *Bayini*, and an associated sacred past, and "outside" Macassan history, that period of contact with trepangers.

This is highlighted by the fact that in all myths which mention Macassans, they are rejected. Mountford (1956-64: 282) refers to a bloody battle between the Thunderman and Macassans, in which the latter are turned away, and Berndt and Berndt (1954: 89) tell of a similar conflict over territory between the sawfish and the visitors. In examining this rejection, McIntosh (1992, 1994a) looked at the somewhat ambiguous Dog/Macassan "encounters" and came to the conclusion that the two totemic operators (Dog and Macassan) are seen to be of the same cosmic class, i.e. being lawless or outside the law. *Bayini* or *Wangarr* Macassan stories, on the other hand, represent sacred "inside" Aboriginal law, and there is no equivalent battles over entry or rejection by totemic beings.

So it is evident that the earliest and the most recent accounts of "inside" law complement each other. They both paint a picture of Aboriginal "loss" relative to the "other". Burrumarra says that neither he nor his brothers spoke publicly of *Birrinydji* in the past. Explanations were always given in terms of the historical *Bayini*, and then only "women's" stories were revealed. It was because "all things from women are free." *Birrinydji* stories on the other hand were "too strange, too strong, and too hard to understand".

*Birrinydji* is too deep in us, too close to our heart. He is the King and we are his subjects. We can talk of *Bayini* only. These *Yolngu* women had many children who grew up to be *bunggawa*. We are the children of those women; the children of *Birrinydji* and *Bayini*. *Bayini* is a *Yolngu* woman, Gumatj, Warramiri, Wangurri and so on. *Birrinydji* is our father (D. Burrumarra, pers. comm. 1990).

Belief in *Birrinydji* is for Aborigines alone, Burrumarra says. It is not about Macassans or Europeans, but rather who Aborigines are or should be in relation to them, i.e. respected as people of equal status if not wealth. In contrast

to these “inside” stories, “outside” representations of contact have taken numerous forms and in the next section I put forward a possible explanation for the fact that accounts appear to be in constant flux.

### INTERPRETATIONS AND REVELATIONS IN TRANSITION

Building on Worsley’s (1955: 9) view that descriptions of the Macassan era are coloured by the contemporary social situation and relationships with “whites”, my hypothesis is that *Birrinydji/Bayini* mythology is constituted in the ever-changing relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, and its emergence and decline in relevance correlates with developments in this area.

In the 1920s, the recorded view was that spirit Macassans had been present at the “beginning of time”, and that Aborigines once possessed the wealth that now only the “other” enjoys. In the 1940s and 1950s, these *Wangarr* beings were referred to as the *Bayini* and were also seen as actual historical voyagers. In the 1960s, Macknight (1972: 312-313) found that knowledge of the *Bayini* had all but disappeared, with detailed knowledge limited to a few older men, in particular Burrumarra. In the 1990s, the “inside” law of the past was openly discussed for the first time, suggesting that the stories of the *Bayini*, rather than being lost, had been obliquely referred to by Warner in the 1920s, partially revealed to the Berndts and Mountford in the 1940s, and totally restricted in the 1960s.

Aborigines were not being deceptive in speaking only in terms of myth or history with anthropologists or historians, but rather were being cautious about revealing “inside” details of a body of law which has its foundation in the knowledge of the existence of the “other” and the presence of that “other” on Aboriginal land.

I have the advantage here of having had as my chief informant David Burrumarra<sup>3</sup>, a man who worked with both the Berndts, Thomson, and Macknight, and who was the primary owner, as leader of the Warramiri clan, of the stories relating to the exploits of pre-Macassans, and *Birrinydji*. In discussions with him, it is apparent that the distinction between “inside” and “outside” myth/history has allowed for a diver-

sity of ways of both speaking about Macassans and also for making adjustments in what is to be publicly known of the past.

Examples of this are numerous. Following contact with academic historians, scientists and missionaries, certain “outside” changes were made in accounts of the trepangers. Tamarind trees contain the spirit of *Birrinydji* in “inside” interpretations, but are also “outside” historical markers of Macassan campsites. Similarly, an “inside” view sees the dug-out canoe as the legacy of *Birrinydji*, via contact with the historical pre-Macassan *Bayini*, whereas in “outside” accounts, they were often the gift of Macassan trepangers at the end of the season (D. Burrumarra, pers. comm. 1992).

Macknight (pers. comm. 1994) says he was told various snippets of myth but was not in a position to do anything with such data, and one might presume that Aboriginal informants would pick up on this very quickly. If the “Macassan” past was to be investigated, then “totem” hunters and the *Bayini*, or other sensitive matters, need not be brought up in discussions.

The considerable changes in accounts in the literature from the 1920s up to the present can also be seen in terms of this management of “inside” and “outside” interpretations of law by *Yolngu* leaders. What can be spoken about depends to a large degree on the nature of relations between the parties involved. Thus, when Warner and Thomson were doing their fieldwork, the Methodist missions were just beginning. According to Burrumarra, the movement of people to the communities of Milinginbi (1923), Yirrkala (1935) and Galiwin’ku (1942) was seen by some as part of *Birrinydji*’s plan (McIntosh 1994b: 102). It was to be the fulfilment of *Birrinydji*’s “promise”. Aborigines and Europeans would share in the wealth of the land, and this might explain the emphasis on the mythological in the early accounts. Only later, in attempts to protect “inside” knowledge from outside scrutiny, was there motivation to create an “outside” historical term for an “inside” body of law.

If one accepts the view that the necessity for maintaining traditions relating to the perceived motives and power of the “other” came into question in the mission period, it is not therefore surprising that there would be a corresponding emphasis on “history” as opposed to myth when “black” and “white” lived together in a single

<sup>3</sup> David Burrumarra died on October 13, 1994, at Elcho Island.





Fig. 9. The Warramiri Flag Treaty Proposal. Burrumarra (centre) is flanked by Liwukang (left) and Berripang. *Birrinydji* is shown on the bottom left, and on the right are two octopus emblems, suggesting links to the “outside” image (Fig. 4).

community. Just as followers of “cargo cults” in Melanesia now deny they were ever involved in such movements (Hermann 1992: 66), there is/ was also a degree of embarrassment associated with older beliefs associated with Macassans, i.e. that Aborigines were once “white”. Rather than risk their being held to mockery, *Birrinydji* and *Bayini* largely disappeared from general usage. How else can one explain why researchers in the 1960s up until the 1990s were not shown or told about the major *Bayini* and *Birrinydji* sites, which in many cases coincide with trepanning areas?

*Birrinydji* ceremonies are still performed today at initiations, funerals, community celebrations and even in some cases, Christian gatherings, but it is not a celebration of the past and performance makes no direct reference to the visits of Macassans. Along with sites in the landscape and sacred objects connected to this law, such rituals remain of fundamental significance to the identity of many *Yolngu* clan groups.

This is highlighted in *Yothu Yindi*'s<sup>4</sup> songs “Treaty” and “*Djapana*”, which both refer to the *Birrinydji* theme and to *Yolngu* solidarity in the face of the non-Aboriginal presence (Burrumarra, pers. comm. 1992).

#### BIRRINYDJI AND A TREATY PROPOSAL IN NORTH-EAST ARNHEM LAND

So why has new data on *Birrinydji* and *Bayini* been released in recent times? Certain events, I suggest, have ensured *Birrinydji*'s continuing relevance, even if detailed knowledge of this law is restricted to a single generation of older men. The mining operation at Gove, and the perceived flagrant denial or ignorance of Aboriginal rights by fishermen and tourists has seen the re-emergence in new forms of action based around the *Birrinydji* theme - in this case, a treaty proposal for Australia by Burrumarra and two other senior men of the Warramiri clan, Liwukang and Wulanybuma (Figs 9-10).

<sup>4</sup> A *Yolngu* “rock” band from north-east Arnhem Land.

The Warramiri plan was to make a series of flags incorporating symbols from the past and the present which would unite “black” and “white” Australians. Burrumarra’s idea was that in the future, the country would have not just one, but many national flags, each containing Aboriginal symbols relevant to the area in which it was flying, depending on what it meant to the Aboriginal inhabitants (Burrumarra, n.d.). For instance if one was in Sydney, the flag might incorporate images of the possum, rainbow serpent and dolphin or other designs. Various versions of the Warramiri flag, for instance, incorporate sacred images of the whale, squid, octopus and *Birrinydji*. The common thing with all the Australian flags, Burrumarra said, would be that the “sacred” symbol of Great Britain, the Union Jack, would appear in the upper left hand corner, as in the current flag<sup>5</sup>.

In Burrumarra’s vision, the past and present seen through *Birrinydji/Bayini* mythology creates an image of a future in which Aborigines will be recognised as spokespersons for the country and have the riches of non-Aborigines. What had happened on Aboriginal land allowed all Australians to reflect on what was happening now in Aboriginal dealings with non-Aborigines. From the earliest memories of Warramiri history when “black” and “white” people danced together, to the “fall”, to fights against domination by outsiders, both Macassans and miners, the Warramiri have come to an understanding about how events should and must proceed. As Burrumarra says, “the policy we have in relation to the *Balanda* (non-Aborigine) is the same now as it was in the beginning”. This is the policy of *Birrinydji*. It was only by telling the story of the past that a deeper understanding of the rights of Aborigines can be understood and respected. The myths are therefore not merely about a remote Dreamtime or the result of reflections upon the Macassan period. *Birrinydji* is about the future and what actions need to be taken to make it coincide with a utopian vision of how things were prior to the “fall”.

The present living conditions of Aborigines in Arnhem Land and the complex relationships with non-Aborigines have warranted a change

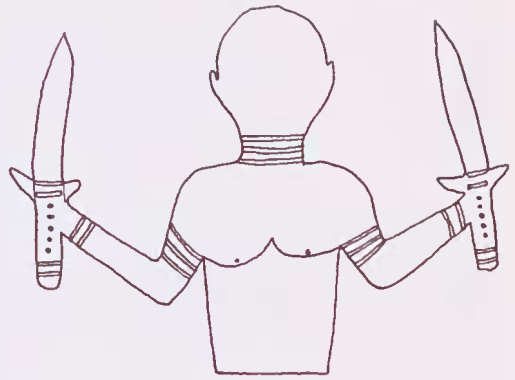


Fig. 10. An image of *Birrinydji* on the Warramiri flag treaty design.

in the status of *Birrinydji*, heralding the need for new laws, to be enacted by Parliament, to confirm one another’s rights in relation to each other. As Burrumarra says, if his treaty proposal is accepted, and the Government raises the flag representing both black and white Australians, then “*Birrinydji* can put down the swords”:

...we would still use them for ceremonies, but we are burying them in the sand. We do not live by the sword any longer, by that law. We have different principles.

Today, people live as one group. “Black” can marry “white” and vice versa. This is part of the lesson of the treaty. We are different today than before. We live by a new law. Our histories have merged. The law of the past was *Yolngu* for *Yolngu* and *Bayini* for *Bayini*. This is *Birrinydji*’s law. We do not mix. Outsiders tried to steal the women and steal the land. We would lose everything. But we can share the future if there is equality.

We know the law of *Birrinydji* in the past but this is a new world now... In the past we were his servants, servants of the *bunggawa* (*Birrinydji*). Now we want equality. We ask Bill Hayden, Can we be equal in your eyes? (Burrumarra pers. comm. 1990).

The Warramiri leaders are thus putting into effect “...in transformed economic and social space, a *Habitus* which is the product of a previous state in this world,” to use Bourdieu’s (1993) terms. To re-use, in novel ways, beliefs

<sup>5</sup> Here again we have two separate interpretations of the significance of a particular symbol. While there is a push to have the Union Jack removed from the Australian flag in Australia, for the Warramiri it is a symbol of profound importance, and of relevance in depicting and commenting on historical relationships between Aborigines and non-Aborigines.



all but "lost in time", is an attempt at transforming the nature of practices associated with the belief. In airing the stories, the elders are attempting to facilitate the enactment of a treaty of reconciliation with Government authorities.

## CONCLUSION

While interpretations of the Aboriginal past make reference to varied contacts between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, a majority of the stories associated with that body of "inside" law now referred to as *Birrinydji* are drawn from experiences and reflections of Macassan contact. The search for one group by the "outside" term for this body of law, i.e. *Bayini* is therefore misplaced. It is of far less significance than to ask the question, why have Aborigines represented the past as they have done.

What is the significance of these representations now in Aboriginal dealings with the "other"? The subject is an extremely complex one. At present, the term *Bayini* is the name of a female ancestral being of the Warramiri and other clans in north-east Arnhem Land, and also a personal name for a female Aboriginal, meaning "white woman" (Zorc 1986). It can also be used in reference to pre-Macassans, although, as stated, this is an "inside" view of limited currency today. It was used in the past as a means of not speaking about *Birrinydji*, the *Wangarr* Macassan, and it allowed for a distinction, in "time" between "inside" "timeless" laws and accounts of Macassan trepangers. I use the word "time" here in inverted commas, for *Birrinydji* and *Bayini* are ancestors of Warramiri clan members, not in a biological sense, but in a deeply held and paradoxical view that in the past, Aborigines and the "visitors" were united in the laws of *Birrinydji*, but the failure of *Yolngu* to follow this law has become an explanation for perceived inequality or "loss" in terms of the "other". So the people Aborigines dealt with on a day to day basis in the Macassan trepanging era necessarily came after those that Aborigines were separated from at the "beginning of time".

Such findings highlight the problem of making definitive statements about the Aboriginal past. Truth is a matter of context. *Birrinydji* mythology is constituted in the ever-changing nature of relations with the "other" and provides a reference point for representations relating to

the Macassan era. In paintings one can see the full range of views, from actual historical episodes but which depict aspects of *Birrinydji*'s technology (knives and trepang boilers), to the predominantly mythological, i.e. the *Bayini* at Port Bradshaw. At different times, depending on the nature of relationships between Aborigines and the "other", "inside" myth as opposed to "outside" history may predominate in public discussion, while at others, "history" is the primary means of referring to a sacred past.

The body of "inside" law symbolised by the use of the expression *Bayini*, remains of profound significance to the *Yolngu*, being associated with particular tracts of land and sacred ceremonies. While it is questionable as to whether people still believe that *Birrinydji* is the foundation of the wealth of the "other", such laws continue to motivate action designed to affirm the place of the *Yolngu* in relation to the "other", as it must have done in the past, though under quite different circumstances.

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